



Philosophy and happiness

Lisa Bortolotti, ed., Palgrave Macmillan, 2009

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Review by
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The question “what is happiness?” may appear from a distance to be a straightforward question with a single answer, but upon inspection we find it is a complex Russian nesting doll of questions, with each question opening up to reveal still further questions beyond it. A fruitful analysis of happiness requires not just a search for answers but also an understanding of what the relevant questions are. *Philosophy and Happiness*, an impressive volume edited by Lisa Bortolotti, provides an excellent illustration of how the analysis of happiness requires clear thought about both the relevant questions and their potential solutions. This book, which grew out of the conference *Happiness and the Meaning of Life*, held at the University of Birmingham in 2007, offers a fresh perspective on a number of classic questions about happiness and also points the way toward new avenues of research.

The individual contributions to the book address a number of issues and are organized thematically into two parts. The first part, “Happiness and the Meaningful Life,” brings together articles that consider, from various perspectives, the complex interplay between happiness (taken either in the sense of episodic happiness or in the more global sense of ‘a happy life’) and meaning (which can also be taken in two senses—either in the sense of the meaning someone *gives* to certain aspects of her life, or in the sense of the significance or ‘worthwhileness’ of a life overall).

In the first chapter, Thaddeus Metz explores the distinctions between episodic happiness (here defined as ‘pleasant experience’) and meaning (in the sense of the meaningfulness of a person’s life overall). He argues that, among other differences, happiness is largely subjective and meaning is largely objective. While a life can be meaningful without happiness, he says, a meaningful life is further enriched by the presence of happiness.

John Cottingham explores meaning from another angle in an insightful argument about the diachronic nature of happiness. Happiness, he says, is not just a matter of our individual experiences, but is also significantly dependent upon how we interpret those experiences. He argues that the concept of happiness is both an evaluative and a hermeneutic concept, so that to understand how any particular moment in a person’s life affects her happiness, we have to know what meaning that moment has *for her*. Furthermore, the meaning it has for her will shift as she moves through life; the meaning of her past experiences is shaped by her current perspective as well as by her anticipation of the future. As such, to understand a person’s overall happiness we cannot just look at isolated time-slices of her life and add them up. In particular, suffering—whether experienced or anticipated—can transform our understanding of how our lives are going.



Pedro Alexis Tabensky also looks at the connection between suffering and happiness. According to Tabensky, happiness—understood here as joy—and suffering, rather than being polar opposites, can be causally connected. To wit, the most valuable form of joy is found not in the absence of suffering, but rather results *from* suffering. The joy that we manage to wrest from suffering is both different from and better than any joy that could be attained without it.

Both Cottingham and Tabensky explore how suffering can provide an impetus for the sort of reflection that helps our lives gain meaning. Laurence James extends this analysis by arguing that death—or, more precisely, the expectation of it—is necessary for living a meaningful life. Without the expectation of death, he argues, we would have no incentive to make choices about how to spend our time and which projects to devote ourselves to. We would give our lives no shape, and it is shape that imbues our lives with meaning. The immortal life, he argues, would therefore be a meaningless one.

Muireanna Quigley and John Harris also consider immortality in their contribution, but they come to a different conclusion. Rather than depriving a life of meaning, immortality (or at least, an indefinitely extended lifespan such as regenerative medicine could potentially provide us), would allow our lives to have *more* meaning by giving us more opportunities to achieve success in projects we value.

Rounding off the first part of the book, Havi Carel and Mike W. Martin also consider how suffering and happiness can coexist. Havi Carel employs a phenomenological approach to explore the connection between happiness and health. According to Carel, how our lives are going is a matter of both our experiences and our perceptions, and because of this, happiness and sickness are not mutually exclusive. She makes a compelling argument for the need for healthcare practitioners to consider health problems from the standpoint of phenomenology, so as to better comprehend how the patient's life as a whole is affected by illness.

In the final chapter of Part I, Mike W. Martin provides a trenchant analysis of the nature of, and interactions between, happiness and meaning, and of how suffering fits into this picture. To live a happy life, he says, we must have meaning, although meaning alone is not enough. We also need to have some degree of enjoyment in our lives. Where suffering fits in to this picture thus depends both on what we make of the suffering, and on whether the suffering we experience allows us any room for enjoyment.

While the individual chapters in Part I make different arguments, they all point to one important claim: that to understand what impact episodic experiences of happiness and suffering have on how happy or meaningful a life is overall, we need to consider how people *make* meaning out of, and derive happiness from, these lived experiences.

The chapters in the second part of the book, entitled "Happiness and the Mind," explore a wide variety of questions relating to mental states and happiness. In the first chapter of this section, Elaine Duncan, Ilaria Grazzani-Gavazzi, and Usha Kiran Subba, like the authors in Part I, explore the role that the interpretation of experience plays in happiness, but they approach this question from an empirical perspective. Summarizing cross-cultural research that employs self-reports to study episodic and global happiness, they rightly note that we need more empirical research on lay theories of happiness in order to attain a better understanding of what these self-reports mean.

Edoardo Zamuner focuses on episodic happiness from an epistemic perspective. How do we know when another person is experiencing happiness? He argues that we can gain knowledge about a person's happiness through visual perception, and he uses this argument to make a point about the distinction between observational properties and non-observational properties that has wider relevance for how we study happiness.

Switching gears in Chapter 10, Erik Angner takes a step back to consider the question of the role that happiness should play in our analysis of how countries are progressing. Partly in response to well-known objections to using GDP as the basis for societal assessment and the development of public policy, there have been increasing calls for the use of measures of subjective well-being as an alternative for these purposes. However, Angner persuasively argues that method of analysis would suffer from many of the same problems that arise from focusing solely on GDP. Measures of average levels of subjective well-being do not tell us about the *distribution* of well-being throughout the population, and they also tell us nothing about other things we might value. They do not tell us how equitable a society is, for instance, or how educated and autonomous its people are. Though a just, educated, and autonomous society might be happier than one that is not, we cannot and should not use subjective well-being as an indirect measure of these goods.

Next, Iain Law provides a thoughtful discussion of the difficulties that subjective and objective accounts of happiness encounter in trying to accommodate our pre-theoretic intuitions about happiness. In particular, he argues that if subjective accounts are to be viable, they need to find a way to make better sense of our common intuition that a person can be mistaken about her own happiness.

The last three chapters of the book, by James Lenman, Jordi Fernández, and Valerie Tiberius, explore the connections between identity, self-knowledge, and happiness. James Lenman argues that our decisions about how to live are properly aimed at the Humean goal of living a life that is able to withstand reflection, and that when we are trying to figure out what the (prudentially) good life is, what we are aiming for is some sort of stable conception of living well.

Jordi Fernández shows what we can learn about happiness from considering the problem of incommensurable choices. According to Fernández, what incommensurable choices present us with is a choice between two different hierarchies of value. Deciding well when faced with such a choice requires knowledge of our values and desires, but such knowledge is not enough, for making this type of decision is also an act of self-creation. When we decide between two hierarchies of value, we are deciding what kind of person to be.

In the final chapter of the book, Valerie Tiberius, like Lenman, looks at happiness from a Humean perspective. She argues that living a life that can bear our own scrutiny requires wisdom. To avoid regret, we need to choose wisely when faced with options about how to live, and this requires self-knowledge. Rather than simply arguing that we need more self-reflection, however, Tiberius looks to psychological research to draw conclusions about when reflection can be useful and when it can be harmful. This chapter is a fitting one to close the book, as it shows how theory and empirical research can and should be brought to bear in addressing the important questions of how to live.

Individually, the chapters in this book are all of a high quality and can stand on their own, but when read together an interesting dialogue emerges that shows how investigations proceeding from different starting points can work together to reveal a clearer picture of what it is we are studying. To gain a better understanding of happiness, we need to raise questions at several levels of analysis. We need to ask questions about the concepts we use, and about the potential sources and elements of happiness and how these elements interact. We also need to look into the various aids and impediments to the pursuit of happiness, and consider broad questions about the role happiness should play in decisions and evaluations at the societal level. In addition, it is important that we approach these questions from different perspectives, as answers coming from fields beyond our own can help us to question our own assumptions

and alert us to issues we might be overlooking. *Philosophy and Happiness* provides an excellent illustration of how this can be done. A rewarding and thought-provoking read, it proposes some intriguing answers and, perhaps even more importantly, raises still further questions that can help direct our investigations into the elusive nature of happiness.

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